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ABSTRACT

One of the theories favoring alternative schools suggests that scholastic success and social support raise students' self-esteem and reduce their provocation to become delinquents. A longitudinal study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of three alternative secondary schools in improving the behavior of highly delinquent and disruptive students. These students were also compared to students in the conventional schools from which they came. The data indicated that the alternative schools made a significant difference in the behavior of students who were less anxious and depressed and whose delinquency seemed effective in defending against negative affect. The assertion that poor scholastic experiences are significant causes of delinquent behavior, particularly at school, received substantial support. Further research is needed to determine whether alternative school-based programs should screen out very depressed and anxious students because the programs are less likely to help them. (JAC)

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAMS TO THE SAFETY OF AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Executive Summary

June 1981

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Executive Summary
(Revised June, 1981)

Introduction

The research summarized here is a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of a particular type of alternative secondary school in improving the behavior of delinquent and disruptive students. The three alternative schools observed were selected by theoretical criteria because this research was intended not only to assess their effectiveness but also to test a theory which identifies scholastic experiences as a major source of provocation to delinquency.

The alternative school programs made special efforts (1) to provide their students, who had had histories of scholastic failure, with experiences of success, largely through individualized instruction and evaluation; and (2) to provide social support from warm, accepting teachers. According to the theory, scholastic success and social support were hypothesized to raise the students' self-esteem and strengthen the social bonds that integrate students with their schools. Thus, the provocation to be delinquent would be reduced, the social constraints against delinquency would be strengthened, and consequently disruptive and delinquent behavior would decline.

Theoretical framework

The theory that guided this research assumes that the student role is central and critical for American adolescents. Therefore, failure in this role constitutes a substantial threat to adolescents' self-esteem. Derogated self-esteem is psychologically aversive and provokes efforts to counteract it. Delinquent behavior is one such defensive response that is particularly well-suited to this purpose. Delinquent behavior, especially disruptive behavior at school, can be an effective

defense for several reasons. First, since a major provocation is failure at school, then disrupting school is a counter-attack on the threatening institution. Second, assuming that delinquent and disruptive behavior is a self-aggrandizing performance, its worth is enhanced by the appreciative peer audience often available at school. Third, delinquent and disruptive behavior at school conveys a declaration of rebellion against the standards of success set by the schools.

The students and the alternative programs

The students in the study were on the average quite heavily delinquent. Their self-reported delinquent behavior was markedly more frequent and serious than the national average found in the National Surveys of Youth. The students also had histories of poor performance and disruptive behavior at school. About half of those who attended the alternative schools were sent there by school officials and the other half volunteered, although poor school grades and high levels of self-reported delinquent behavior were similar among the referrals and the volunteers.

The three alternative programs were operated by two public school systems in white, working- to middle class suburban areas. The programs served 30 to 60 students at a time in buildings near the junior and senior high schools which the students would ordinarily have attended. The curricula and procedures were more informal than the conventional schools', there were many fewer rules, and the administrators and teachers were more tolerant and flexible than faculty in conventional

schools ordinarily are or can be. Teacher-student ratios were higher than is usually the case in secondary schools. Instances of disruptive behavior in the alternative schools were rare.

Two of the alternative programs, Alpha and Beta, featured independent study/learning contracts. The students in each also met daily as a group for one and a half to two hours for training in human relations and communication skills. The third program, Ace, offered a more conventional school curriculum and schedule, except that Ace was smaller, more individualized and more warm and personal than a conventional program.

Study Design

Students attending the alternative schools were compared with students at the conventional schools from which they came. The comparison group consisted of students who were named by counselors and vice-principals as students also appropriate for alternative school referral. (The original design called for random assignment of students to the alternative programs from a pool of referrals and volunteers. Agreements on randomization were made at a time when it was believed that the alternative schools would be as oversubscribed as they had been in previous years. But when the time came to make assignments, there was not in fact oversubscription, so all referrals and volunteers were enrolled in the alternative schools and comparison students were identified later.) The alternative and conventional students were interviewed once early in the school year, as alternative students entered their programs, again at the end of the school year, and a third time in the following fall.

Of the 240 students initially identified as suitable participants in the study, 100 were alternative school students and 140 were students in the comparison group who attended only the conventional school. We interviewed 83 percent of the alternative school students and 69 percent of the comparison group in the first wave. In the third wave, we interviewed 72 percent of the originally identified alternative students and 64 percent of the conventional students. The alternative and conventional students were quite similar when the study began. They each had about the same number of boys as girls; the grade point averages of the students in the two groups were equally poor; personal adjustment, assessed by psychological indexes of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression was about the same in both groups; both groups had equally negative attitudes toward school generally and equally small commitment to the role of student; and their disruptive and delinquent behavior was at about the same high level, as indicated by the schools' records of disciplinary action and by the students' own reports of their behavior in school and in the community. The alternative students and the conventional comparison group also differed to a statistically significant degree in some respects: the alternative students were somewhat younger, they were more negative about their conventional school teachers, more pessimistic about their chances of succeeding at school, and felt more stigmatized as "bad kids."

Measurement and data analysis

A key variable in this study is of course whether students attended an alternative school or not (many alternative school students took some conventional school courses concurrently). But since we are also interested in the social psychological processes by which the

alternative programs intended to improve the students' performance and behavior, we constructed measures of these mediating processes as well. One is an index of students' perceptions of the flexibility and fairness of their schools' policies and rules. Another is the students' assessment of their academic prospects--their beliefs in their chances of being successful students, together with their feelings of being stigmatized if they attended an alternative school. A third mediating variable is respondents' assessments of how well they were currently performing in the student role--including their most recent course grades, their reports of the effort they were devoting to schoolwork, and their satisfaction with their performance. Fourth, we measured students' global attitude toward school, including participation in school activities and relationships with teachers.

Finally among the mediating variables, we measured students' self-esteem at both conscious and unconscious levels. We wanted to test that portion of our theory of delinquent behavior which asserts that a primary function of delinquent behavior is to defend poor students from feelings of low self-esteem. We hypothesized that, as a psychological defense, delinquent behavior raises adolescents' <u>conscious</u> self-esteem but <u>not</u> their <u>unconscious</u> self-esteem. The latter would remain low until experiences such as scholastic success make defensive delinquency unnecessary. Our own prior research (Gold & Mann, 1972; Mann, in press) had shown that the more delinquent adolescent boys gave evidence of high conscious and low unconscious self-esteem. Furthermore, Kaplan (1976) has demonstrated that youth with low conscious self-esteem will subsequently commit more delinquent acts than youth with higher self-esteem; and that conscious self-esteem will rise as a result.

Disruptive and delinquent behavior in school and in the community was measured by the confidential reports of the students themselves, a widely-used technique that has proved to be more sensitive and valid than official school, police, and court records.

All of these variables were measured among both alternative and conventional school students. Measures of change over the course of the study were also created, using a procedure--regression analysis--that corrects for unequal baseline levels.

Our basic strategy was to compare students who had had alternative school experience with those who had had none at each of the three time periods and with respect to changes over time. Comparisons were made of the two groups each taken as a whole and for each of the three programs. We determined whether alternative school experience made a difference in the mediating processes and in delinquent and disruptive behavior at the third time period, by which time most of the alternative school students had returned to the conventional schools. We also explored whether the alternative schools affected different kinds of students differently.

Findings

The delinquent and disruptive behavior of both the alternative and conventional school students declined over the course of the study, probably reflecting in part a combination of statistical artifact ("regression to the mean") and actual improvement accompanying maturation. However, almost all of the social psychological processes that were hypothesized to make a difference in the misbehavior of youth

were indeed found to predict to a significantly greater decline. And the alternative schools were more effective in putting these processes in motion.

We found that the effectiveness of the alternative school programs to be conditioned upon the kind of students in their classes. The alternative schools made a significant difference in the behavior of their more buoyant students, but they had a negligible effect on the more beset students.

The "beset" students in this study were identified as those alternative and conventional students who exhibited relatively high levels of anxiety and depression during our first interview with them. They reported to us more than the average frequency of somatic symptoms of anxiety such as headaches and upset stomachs; they said they felt tense and nervous; they said that they more often "feel depressed". The beset students were those who scored in the top third of a scale composed of these indicators. We called the other two-thirds of the students "buoyant". The alternative and conventional school groups in this study each had about the same proportion of beset students. Beset students tended to be somewhat more delinquent that the buoyant students. They resemble the unsocialized "neurotic" type of delinquent that Hewitt and Jenkins (1946) identified from clinical records.

The beset alternative students did not respond as positively to the programs as the buoyant students did. Figure 1 presents the processes by which the alternative schools had a significantly more positive effect on the disruptive behavior of their buoyant students even after these students returned to the conventional schools. At critical points in these processes, the beset students responded differently.

Both buoyant and beset alternative students reported that their schools were more flexible and their rules more fair compared with the conventional descriptions of their schools. Clearly the two kinds of programs were perceived differently by their students. All students who rated their school as more flexible and fair tended to believe their own academic prospects were better than other students did. But the effect of greater flexibility in the alternative programs persisted only among their buoyant students after they returned to the conventional schools. By the third interview, the beset former alternative students were no more optimistic than the beset conventional students. Similarly, the perception of the flexibility of school rules was related to our respondents' commitment to the role of student. Since the alternative schools were seen as being more flexible, they fostered greater commitment to the student role, but only among the alternative schools' buoyant students, who then remained more committed through the third interview. The beset alternative students as a group never exceeded their conventional counterparts in commitment to studenthood, despite their recognition of the alternative schools' greater flexibility.

In general, brighter academic prospects and greater commitment to being students were reflected in better global attitudes toward school among alternative and conventional students. And again, since the alternative school students became more optimistic and committed, their attitudes toward school were better. This remained true of the buoyant alternative students even after they returned to the conventional schools, but not of the beset students. Improved attitudes toward school were related to a greater decline in delinquent and disruptive behavior in school. So by the third interview, the buoyant former

alternative students were behaving markedly better in school than their conventional counterparts according to students' own reports of their behavior and to ratings by their teachers. They were also earning higher grades. This was not true of the beset former alternative students.

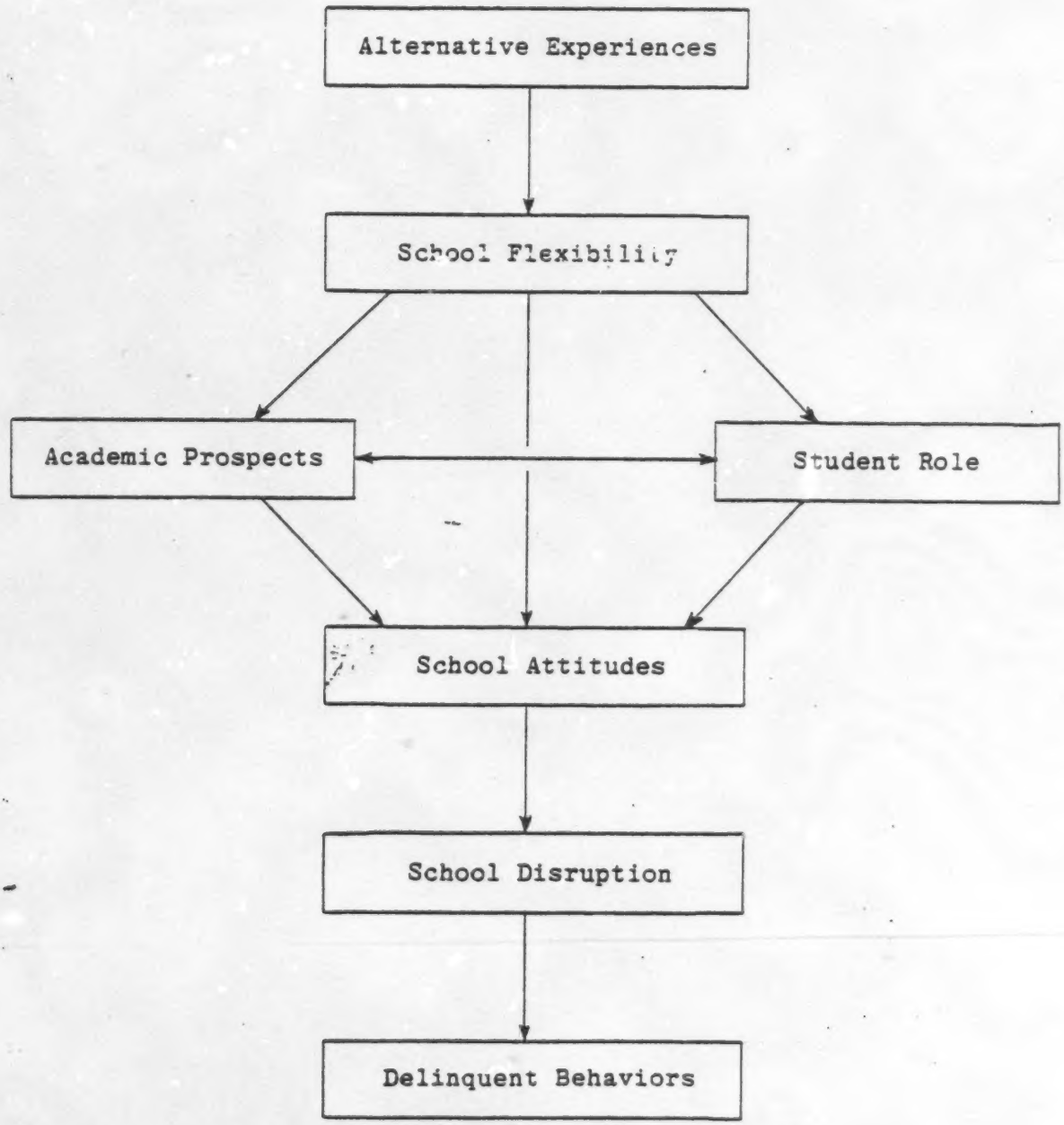
Declining misbehavior in school was related to declining delinquency in the community. But, while this relationship was strong, it was of course not perfect. So neither the buoyant nor the beset former alternative students reported that they were less delinquent at the third interview than the conventional students did.

We found a general decline in students' conscious self-esteem over the course of this study, about equal among alternative and conventional students. Changes in students' behavior did not seem to depend on such changes in self-esteem. In this respect, the theoretical model was not confirmed, a surprising finding in the light of previous research.

We can draw only highly tentative conclusions from comparing the three alternative programs because the numbers of students in any one program is small. Insofar as these comparisons can be trusted, it seems that the Alpha program had the most marked effects--positive and negative--on its students' grades and disruptive behavior in school. Alpha's buoyant students seemed most improved at the third interview, and its beset students appeared to deteriorate most relative to their respective comparison groups. This impression of Alpha's effectiveness is reinforced by the fact that the separate components of the change process (diagrammed in Figure 1) seem more tightly linked at Alpha than at Beta or Ace. Alpha's relative success seems attributable to its greater effectiveness in increasing its buoyant students' commitment to

Figure 1

The Relationship of School Processes to Outcomes



the role of student. Greater commitment persisted more reliably into the conventional school year than positive global attitudes toward school, on which the effects of Beta and Ace depended more heavily. At the same time, Alpha's beset students did not become more committed to the student role, just as Beta's and Ace's beset students did not. But since Alpha's effectiveness depended so heavily on commitment, its beset students fared worst. Alpha probably achieved the greater commitment of its buoyant students through the greater emotional intensity of its program which, of the three programs we observed, most closely resembled group therapy. But the intensity of introspection encouraged by Alpha's method may have worked to the disadvantage of the beset students who were at the outset quite anxious and depressed.

One of the potentially negative aspects of an alternative school experience is stimatization. Youth may be made to feel that they are different in a derogatory sense by having been sent to a special school for "bad kids". A substantial number of administrators, teachers, and students did hold negative opinions about the alternative programs and the young people who went there. Many of the alternative students were aware of these attitudes and shared them at first. But by our third interview with them, the students who had had an alternative school experience were almost invariably positive about the school and their classmates. So few students at that point expressed feelings of stimatization that it is impossible with our data to determine whether stigma hindered the alternative schools' efforts. We conclude that alternative schools can be effective even though they may be negatively regarded by the educators and students in the associated conventional schools.

It should be noted that the alternative schools were as much if not more successful with their more highly delinquent students. The positive effects of the alternative schools on their buoyant students was greater with those who had been more disruptive and delinquent when they first entered the programs. But the alternative schools had negligible effects on beset students regardless of their history of misbehavior. Clearly then the alternative schools' ineffectiveness with their beset students was not due to the beset students' higher level of delinquency.

The effects of the alternative schools were not mediated by nor conditioned by the level of delinquency of their students' friends. The schools had no discernible effect on changing their students' friends or the degree of their friends' delinquency. If anything, the alternative schools were more successful with those buoyant students who reported having more delinquent friends. We believe that this is actually a reflection of the schools being more effective with students who were more delinquent themselves (who choose to hang around with more delinquent friends).

Nor did the effects of the alternative schools depend upon changing their students' relationships with their parents. None of our data indicate that the social psychological processes by which the alternative schools effected change among their buoyant students involved students' parents. While improving relationships between students and parents would probably improve most adolescents' behavior, it is not a necessary condition for the effectiveness of school programs.

Our theory of a particular kind of alternative school as a means for reducing disruptive and delinquent behavior posits that youngsters' self-esteem is a key variable. Nevertheless, improvement in the behavior and performance of the buoyant alternative students occurred without discernible change in their unconscious self-esteem and in the face of a decline in their conscious self-esteem. Self-esteem proved not so crucial to the processes of change as we had expected it to be. Changes in academic prospects, commitment to the role of student, and attitudes toward school made a difference for the buoyant alternative students.

Conclusion

The assertion that poor scholastic experiences are significant causes of delinquent and disruptive behavior, particularly at school, received substantial support in this study. As certain youngsters' assessments of their schools and of themselves as students became more positive, their scholastic performance and their behavior improved. A key element of the theory which was not confirmed by these data is that improved behavior would depend on increases in adolescents' self-esteem at unconscious levels. Students' behavior improved without the mediation of elevated self-esteem.

As the theory predicted, positive scholastic experiences made a difference in the behavior only of those students whose delinquency seemed effective in defending against negative affect. The more anxious and depressed--the beset--students' behavior did not improve as much, despite their own reports of favorable relationships with their alternative school teachers and positive attitudes toward the alternative school. This raises the question of whether school-based

programs might better screen out manifestly depressed and anxious students because the programs are less likely to help them. Such screening would be advisable if anxiety and depression could be diagnosed accurately, but this is difficult under the best of circumstances and few school systems have the resources to do this well. It seems wiser to us, therefore, to employ alternative school programs in the diagnostic process: if certain students' behavior does not improve despite their greater satisfaction with the alternative program, then a search for other points of intervention might be made. Evaluation of alternative school programs should take these dynamics and limitations into account.

There are several lines of action-research suggested by our findings. We hope to be able to follow our respondents for several more years in order to determine whether the effects found at this point will endure; and to see if perhaps the alternative school experience will prove after all to make a marked difference in the future. We also intend to try to replicate this study with other alternative schools, hoping that the present findings will encourage participating educators to strengthen those elements of their programs that these data suggest are the effective ingredients and thereby become reliably more effective than the conventional schools whose programs they supplement.

Of course producing statistically significant differences between "treatments" is only a tool of action-research, not its ultimate aim. The present findings also offer guidance to conventional secondary school administrators that will help to improve the educational process. While the constraints under which conventional junior and senior high schools operate -- large size, low teacher/student ratios, pressures to

evaluate students impersonally, etc. -- make it impossible for them to adopt wholly the procedures of effective alternative schools, they may be able to alter their programs to a degree and on occasion to accommodate the needs of those students who are showing signs of failure and the negative behaviors consequent to failure so that many of them would not need to be sent to an alternative school. It appears that there is much to be gained generally from educational practices that impress students with their fairness and flexibility; from curricula whose level and pace meet students at their current level of academic adjustment and achievement; and from teaching styles that convey a sense of personal caring and support.

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